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It is no secret that Russell Hoban's masterwork, *Riddley Walker*, is a strong central reference point for David Mitchell's virtuoso, genre-shifting, six-part novel *Cloud Atlas*, a fact often referred to in the notes of critical articles, but rarely explored in any detail. Indeed, within Mitchell's Russian-doll structural premise, itself a mirror of the many sub-narratives of *Riddley Walker* and other postmodern fictions, the final diegetic layer is set in a post-apocalyptic landscape where the inhabitants speak a mangled, phonetically transcribed language much akin to the “Riddleyspeak” within Hoban's novel. This intertextual anchor is one that Mitchell himself confirmed in a pamphlet for the 2005 “some poasyum [symposium]” of *The Kraken*, the Russell Hoban fan club, where he wrote: “Zachry's voice is less hard-core and more Pacific than Riddleyspeak, but Mr Hoban's singular, visionary, ingenious, uncompromising, glorious, angelic and demonic novel sat on my shelf as evidence that what I wanted to do could be done, and as encouragement to keep going until I'd got it right”.

In this paper, I want, first and foremost, to explore the ways in which Mitchell uses Hoban, in order to then open up a broader discussion of Mitchell's specific intertextuality. This will begin with a brief overview of Russell Hoban's works and some examples of Mitchell's appropriation before I lead in to some of the implications of this setup and, finally, the ways in which these resonances resound through the novel. As an up-front position statement, I read Mitchell's text as a somewhat conservative work with an aesthetic that harks back, nostalgically, for radical experimentation. Indeed, I think that Mitchell's Orphic, nostalgic, backwards-looking mode of textual weaving ultimately undermines our ability to claim *Cloud Atlas* as a future-orientated experimental work. This argument is bolstered by the fact that Mitchell's appropriation of Hoban must be considered within the contexts of postmodern parody. In Linda Hutcheon's formulation, this should include a “critical ironic distance” if works are to successfully re-contextualise their referents. While Hoban can be considered “a radically postmodernist writer” in the words of Christine Wilkie-Stibbs, one whose re-working of the Punch and Judy show in *Riddley Walker*

clearly exhibits this re-contextualisation, Mitchell's twenty-first-century re-castings of his sources appear more repetitious and less differentiated than might be expected, especially given that many critics – although emphatically *not* Mitchell himself – are keen to describe the novel as “experimental”. Mitchell's re-iterations of Hoban's themes and language, I will argue, do not differ sufficiently for claims of radical experimentation to hold.

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Let me begin, then, with a brief overview of the works of Russell Hoban, a figure whose corpus has largely been overlooked by the academy, and to give a brief summary with some examples of the features of Hoban's works with reference to their parallels in *Cloud Atlas*. Over the course of a varied career as a wartime radio operator, an illustrator and then novelist, Russell Hoban wrote sixteen adult novels (in multiple senses of “adult”) and at least fifty children's books. From his earliest adult writing, *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*, through *Riddley Walker*, *Pilgermann*, *Mr. Rinyo-Clacton's Offer*, *The Medusa Frequency*, to *Angelica Lost and Found*, Hoban's thematic concerns and philosophical lineage can be clearly defined. Broadly speaking, Hoban's focus rests upon: notions of flux (“flicker”) and ontological instability, in the Heraclitean tradition as described by Aristotle; solipsism and subjective idealism, particularly in the tradition of George Berkeley; transcendental idealism's preoccupations with the split between phenomenon and noumenon; a wariness of science, especially its applied weaponisation; an almost psychoanalytic styling of an unknowable self; and mythological references and allusive structures.

Briefly working through these concepts in order and it is clear that the very textual presence of flux and postmodern ontological instability tends to align Hoban's texts with a more content-driven model of metatextuality, in Patricia Waugh's sense of a spectrum in which many novels are, to varying degrees, metatextual. This is well illustrated through Hoban's re-writing of flux as “flicker” across his work, a concept that is interrelated with a diegetic layering of reality. In *Fremder*, for example, high-speed space travel is facilitated through “flicker drive”, explained as

utilising “the real reality [...] the moment under the moment”. This focus on a “real reality” not only serves to de-legitimize the corresponding textual reality, but also brings a transience and instability to Hoban's worlds that clearly aligns with Brian McHale's shift from a modernist epistemological dominant to a postmodernist ontological focus.

Correspondingly, this focus on ontological plurality is, evidently, one of the most prominent aspects of Mitchell's novel. This can be seen not only in the proliferation of trans-historical sub-narratives, but also through the dreams that pervade the text in parallel to *Riddley Walker's* “trants [trance]”. Indeed, as in Hoban, when coupled with the narrative's interpolated ordering, these (de)legitimizing oneiric constructs consistently undercut stability in *Cloud Atlas*. Taking, for example, the beginning of Frobisher's story, it is clear that the preceding section has, at this moment, been cut off mid-sentence: “Reading my entry for 15<sup>th</sup> October, when I first met Rafael”. Mitchell then begins Frobisher's letters through a paratactic leap in which the dream construct is once again emphasised: “Dreamt I stood in a china shop so crowded from floor to far-off ceiling with shelves of porcelain antiques”. Through this move, Mitchell at once signals the postmodern historiographic nature of his work (a delicate fictional/dream china shop filled with historical (likewise dreamt) antiques) while, more importantly, implying that the idea of a “real reality” is not to be found in the “Pacific Diary” section. There is, as he puts it, something “shifty about the journal's authenticity”.

This aspect crosses over into Hoban's prominent subjective idealism that is almost always one wherein the protagonist's existence depends upon an external, ontologically unstable object-as-subject believing in the protagonist. This is most evident in two of Hoban's texts, *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz* and *The Medusa Frequency*. In the former, for instance, the narrator points out that the “lion”, which could be a hallucination of the narrator, could also be having a hallucinating featuring the narrator: “A lion hallucinates me”. Likewise, in *The Medusa Frequency*, there is a being called the “world-child” that believes in the world, thus holding it together: “The

world-child holds in its mind the idea of every single thing: root and stone, tree and mountain, river and ocean and every living thing". In *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell likewise continues this thinking when Meronym posits that although "Old Georgie weren't real for her [...] he could still be real for me" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 286). Such a troubling of perception and its connection to reality is linked to Hoban's dreamscapes as, again, it becomes impossible to tell the difference between dream and reality, one person and another, a riff on which Mitchell is clearly also playing with regard to primarily visual perception when Luisa Rey thinks to herself: "Go home and just dream up your crappy three hundred words for once. People only look at the pictures, anyhow" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 90).

Furthermore, the aspects of transcendental idealism that Hoban brings to the fore relate to the inadequacy of perception and the inaccessibility of true essence, thus often signalling his texts' situation in a postmodernist phase that also incorporates epistemological concerns. This is exemplified in the short story, "My Night with Léonie," wherein an erotic encounter is sought with the noumenal sphinx, entailing the need to, once more, "move in behind the flickering to the moment under the moment" (Hoban, 1992b, p. 22). Often, however, this unknowable essence, this sub-moment, pertains to the self. In *Riddley Walker*, Hoban writes of "some kind of thing it aint us but yet its in us," (Hoban, 2002a, p. 6) while in *Fremder* and *The Lion* there is an inability to "know what was looking out of her eyes or mine" (Hoban, 2003, p. 110; Hoban, 2000, p. 21). Interestingly, this is an aspect that Hoban shares with Mitchell, whose Bill Smoke "wonders at the powers inside us that are not us" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 419).

From this perspective, the sense of *deja vu* encountered when opening Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency* immediately after finishing *Cloud Atlas* is also significant. Indeed, Robert Frobisher in the latter directly echoes the disdain and longed-for evasion of Herman Orff in the former, both of which present the authorial fear of non-recognition: "Oh, should I have heard of you?" (a line that occurs directly in both texts). This is not, however, the final word on their resonances for, crucially,

the line is spoken, in both cases, by author surrogates within the texts. In Mitchell's case, this much is clear. The "Cloud Atlas Sextet" composed by Frobisher specifically outlines the structure of the novel within which it is depicted. Described as a work in which "[a]ll boundaries are conventions" and that "one may transcend any convention," (2008a, p. 479) the novel here metatextually signals its own intentions to radical experimentation within a sextet form, with a "semi-invented notion and [...] singular harmonics," (2008a, pp. 486–487) a "sextet for overlapping soloists" in which "each solo is interrupted by its successor" (2008a, p. 463). Mitchell twofold acknowledges the danger here through the ironic mediation of the egoist Frobisher and the direct querying of whether this practice is "[r]evolutionary or gimmicky?," (2008a, p. 463) an aspect of judgement to which this piece will return.

As some closing remarks on Hoban's place within the canon, it is important to note that although Hoban's themes are consistent throughout his oeuvre and are shared with Mitchell's novels, it could be argued that *Riddley Walker*'s distinction as almost the only of Hoban's adult novels to receive substantial academic attention attests to the varying standards of his work. As Wilkie-Stibbs puts it: "[w]hen we think of Russell Hoban we probably think of *The Mouse and His Child* [one of Hoban's books for children] and *Riddley Walker*". It is certainly true that there was a marked decline in the quality of Hoban's output in his later years between *Come Dance with Me* and *My Tango with Barbara Strozzi*, before a return to form in his final works. However, this stance does not bear up under scrutiny as even those works that fall outside these "bad times," as Riddley might put it, have remained neglected.

Of Hoban's works, *Riddley Walker* is the most critically discussed, not only on account of its formal invention, but because it is the most concessionary to critical discourses. Indeed, the novel invites a Freudian analysis of the early primal scene in which Riddley "los [his] footing" and thereby crushes his father to death in Widders Dump, an episode that has a direct parallel not only with Goodparley's failed differentiated repetition later in the text, but also in *Cloud Atlas*. The text

also seems to advise a Luddite caution against technology and especially nuclear technology, as does Mitchell's novel, in the "1 Littl 1" and the "1 Big 1" and the "Clevverness" that "is gone now but littl by littl itwl come back". Finally, *Riddley Walker* foists "the shock of recognition" upon us, wherein we connect our reality to the intra-textual world that resonates with Mitchell's cyclical version of history: "O, what we ben! And what we come to!". Although only one novel written among a life dedicated to producing works that seem almost to be literary philosophy, *Riddley Walker* was the singular greatest aesthetic achievement of Hoban's career and it is little surprise that, of all Hoban's works, it is to this post-apocalyptic deconstruction of society, myth and language that Mitchell chooses to turn.

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As has been briefly outlined in the preceding section, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* resonates with many of Hoban's lifelong fascinations but particularly those with metafictional elements. There are, however, also divergences, particularly when notions of authorial presence are explored. This is most evident in the fact that, although Mitchell also deploys his authorial voice in a scattered fashion, the cartography of *Cloud Atlas* is not one of an unconscious, but rather a literary-historical consciousness that repeats itself in different formal registers. Indeed, Hoban gives a description in *Riddley Walker* that would be just as suited to *Cloud Atlas* when Lorna notes that "What they are is diffrent ways of telling what happent" (Hoban, 2002a, p. 20) which then leads to a discussion of the varying stylistic permutations through which the tales could be told: "Les jus tern it roun and look at it the other way" (Hoban, 2002a, p. 23). Moving from allusion to Melville and sea-faring narrative, through to an epistolary form, into the crime thriller mode, delving into farce before hitting science/speculative fiction and then the post-utopian Hoban frame, Mitchell charts a parallel project of historiography at the aesthetic level.

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As suggested at the outset of this piece, if the experimental form of intertextual reference is

to be preserved, I would suggest that at least one of two factors should be present: 1.) the work should radically supplement, rework or subvert, beyond recuperation, the source text; 2.) the work should layer itself to provide an overloaded proliferation of referents in order to destabilise and recontextualise the source material. Mitchell fares ambivalently by these measures. Clearly, as with Self's *The Book of Dave*, Mitchell's use of *Riddley Walker* is acknowledged and derivative. While David Cowart praises the fact that "Hoban surely knows that a language would change more radically in twenty-five hundred years" and so Riddley-speak must be deemed a "brilliantly stylized version of the English language as it would exist in the fifth millennium," this puts Mitchell's even more recognisable language in a tricky spot (Cowart, 1989, p. 87). Can it be said, though, that Mitchell's language is also "not to be taken as a realistic depiction of linguistic principles, but rather as a metaphor for the scale of human disaster" and, if so, must we concede that there is a lessened effect at work here by comparison to the work to which it refers? (Cowart, 1989, p. 87)

This is debatable. The linguistic derivatives in *Cloud Atlas* are clearly less radically experimental than in Hoban's work. Conducting a comparison and collocation exercise using Peter Christian's *Riddley Walker Concordance* makes this derivation clear (Christian, 2012). Consider, for instance, the first sentence of Sloosha's Crossin': "Old Georgie's path an' mine crossed more times'n I'm comfy mem'ryin, an' after I died, no sayin' what that fangy devil won't try an' do to me" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 249). Conversely, *Riddley Walker* begins thus: "On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs any how there hadnt ben none for a long time befor him nor I aint looking to see none agen" (Hoban, 2002a, p. 1). Firstly, note that these sentences share several thematic characteristics: temporal locative phrases; aspects pertaining to memory and the past; references to, or characterisations as, wild beasts; and speculations on the future. This thematic similarity only increases when, in relation to Riddley's "naming day," again on the first page, Zachry is told to: "Name y'self, boy, is it Zachry the Brave or Zachry the Cowardy?" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 249).



Mitchell's language is, however, instantly more comprehensible, and instantly less experimental, as it deploys sub-clausal commas to mark different senses and apostrophes to indicate elided word forms : "an'," "times'n," "mem'ryin'," "y'self" and "sayin'". This gives, in Mitchell's work, a strange perspective on the narration. At this point, it is supposedly Zachry's now elderly son, far in the future, telling his father's story. However, the way the tale is written with eliding apostrophes indicates that the grammatical conventions of the authorial environment (which, again, can be a different environment to the diegetic proleptic telling of the tale) are such that elision is required when notating the past upon which it looks back. As a corollary, in the entire text of *Riddley Walker* there are no apostrophes, thereby giving a more immanent position and further avoiding the nostalgia trap.

Using the concordance allows easy identification of the synonymous terms deployed between the authors.. Within this first sentence, approximately<sup>i</sup> 53% of the terms used are identical, or practically so, to the vocabulary of *Riddley Walker* and are shared directly with contemporary usage: "old," "path," "mine" (Hoban: "my"), "comfy" (Hoban: "easy"), "after," "I" (Hoban: "i"), "died" (Hoban: "dead"), "no," "what," "that," "try," "do," "to" and "me". A further 15% of the sentence can be seen as identical with both Hoban's, and contemporary, usage when Mitchell's signalled elision is removed to give "and" and "saying". From here, however, the two texts diverge. Hoban's unsignalled elision can be seen as more complex than Mitchell's forms, constituting 11.5% of the first sentence of the latter with "more times'n" (for which Hoban would give "moren"), "I'm" and "won't". In the remaining 15% of the sentence, Hoban and Mitchell use different terms: for "crossed," Hoban would most likely give "mixt"; for "mem'ryin'," Hoban renders "memberment"; in the case of "fangy," Hoban gives "toofy"; and the closest we get to "devil" in *Riddley Walker* would be "Mr Clevver" with "the same red face and littl poynty beard and the horns and all" and his satanic rhyming slang, "they call me Mr On The Levvil" (Hoban, 2002a, p. 137). It is also clear here that for half of this final 15%, Mitchell uses two terms that are straightforward contemporary

English (“crossed” and “devil”), while in the other half (“fangy” and “mem'ryin”), Hoban's usage remains more experimental and, in the case of “toofy,” phonetic.

Such empirical linguistic analysis is far from conclusive. For a start, the small sample of the first sentence is only one measure by which the experimental form can be judged and, in this case, I have taken account neither of word order typologies in the works, nor that this mode takes Mitchell's sentence as the base and cross-correlates with the entirety of Hoban's novel. It remains clear, though, even if demonstrated with a small, weighted sample, that *Riddley Walker*'s vocabulary is more complex and difficult to parse than that found in *Cloud Atlas*, with phrases in the former unmatched in the latter such as “deacon terminations” for decontaminations, “fissional seakerts” playing on nuclear technology and the Official Secrets Act, and “spare the mending” for experimenting. With this aside, then, what could be said more broadly about the measures of experimental intertextuality already mapped out?

By these yardsticks, Mitchell's novel is not an instance of radical intertextuality. His use of broader generic tropes is clever and it is an understatement to say that Mitchell is a virtuoso writer of the shifting voice. However, the most explicit referent in the work, Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, is appropriated as an ur-text that merely serves to replicate itself. Mitchell's text harkens back to *Riddley Walker* only with the desire to repeat it. Indeed, the frame of a post-apocalyptic environment, containing sub-narratives, with the same linguistic tropes as Hoban's novel creates an environment that fails to re-contextualise its source. Although there is some danger of couching this referential function within an outmoded naïve chronology of progress, it nonetheless holds true that in Mitchell's text, and in others that deploy a similar formation such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, this presents a mode of past-orientation with *nostalgia*, rather than future-orientation for *experimentation*.

This is not, as I've taken pains to point out throughout this piece, to overly disparage Mitchell's novel in some Leavis-esque manner, to become one Felix Finch among *Cloud Atlas*'

“*cloud of critics*,” (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 149) the types who “insert the 'Mr.' before sinking the blade in,” (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 150) but merely to pre-empt and tentatively counter claims for experimental novelty and new generic classifications. It is also clear, though, that the specific use of *Riddley Walker* is a derivation that only moderately transforms the work and appears to be conservatively longing for by-gone radical forms; art through situation (a form of generic placement) is not a new phenomenon. While this conflicts with the *pleasure* of reading Mitchell's novel, which remains great, it is important to recognize the function of reference and metafiction after the millennium in order to identify whether we are, too, succumbing to a nostalgia, wistfully looking back, believing that coherent sovereign fragments nested together add up to an experimental overloading and to remember, after all, that “[i]n the false world all ηδονη [*pleasure*] is false” (Adorno, 2004, p. 15).

- i Figures are rounded down, hence the total is not 100%.